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THE SEWANEE REVIEW.

VOL. IX.]

OCTOBER, 1901.

[No. 4.

STEPHEN PHILLIPS.

IN the year 1897 a new star appeared in the firmament of English poetry, and was greeted with an applause perhaps as universal as, certainly more unanimous than, was that which hailed Tennyson. This was natural, since Tennyson had prepared the world for the new poet, and the new poet is Tennyson's legitimate successor in his own line. My own adhesion to the new poet was not due to this general acclaim, for I was unaware of the applause for some time, except doubtless to know that the *Academy's* prize of one hundred guineas had been awarded to a new poet. I am slow to read the much-talked-of new novels, still slower with new poets. A lady, who had been urging me to read Stephen Phillips, on returning to town after a year's absence, handed me the volume. That night I read the poem that had been crowned, "Christ in Hades," and was struck at once by the opening verses:

Keen as a blind man, at dawn awake,
Smells in the dark the cold odor of earth.

I thought the poem strong; but I was not completely captured, and no wonder, for it was late at night, and a man in the forties needs the vigor and freshness of morning in his frame fully to appreciate poetry of a high order. I think it was the next morning I read "Marpessa," and my surrender was immediate and unconditional. I remember saying to some one then: "Outside of the admittedly great poets, this is the best poetry I know."

It is my way, perhaps everybody's way, to try favorite poems on my friends. I was very careful, for only a few

really love poetry. So far I have read "Marpessa" at different times to perhaps a dozen people, and the poem has captured its auditor every time. It was not till months afterwards that I knew that Mr. William Watson, whom I greatly revere as poet and true disciple of Wordsworth, had been doing the same thing with "Christ in Hades." "Even a literary life," he says, "has its pleasures, and I have known no greater pleasure during recent years than my first reading of Mr. Stephen Phillips's 'Christ in Hades'—except, indeed, my second reading of that poem, and perhaps my third." He goes on to tell how, on one occasion, he and Mr. Churton Collins "sat talking about their beloved poets until far into the waning night," and how at length he chanced to discover that Mr. Collins, though he knew everything else under the sun, was ignorant of the name and work of Mr. Stephen Phillips. Reading passages from the "Christ in Hades" "to fastidiously attentive ears," he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had won the appreciation of the critic. "Very soon I began to feel," continues Mr. Watson, "that if Mr. Phillips did not quickly do something to sustain the position which this one noble poem had earned for him I should have a personal grievance to ventilate. I was deeply committed as a prophet, and my credit was at stake. And so it befell that in due season he kept his promise and was even better than his word. In 'Marpessa' he has demonstrated what I should hardly have thought demonstrable: that another poem can be even finer than 'Christ in Hades.'"

Mr. Stephen Phillips was born July 28, 1868. His mother was a descendant of Wordsworth, and to her he attributes his love of verse, which, though innate, was dormant, for he had a boy's contempt for all things metrical. But at fifteen, when he was ill, his mother read to him "Christabel." This proved to be the touch that awakened his spirit, and he rose from his illness determined to be a poet. For years he wrote a great deal, gaining at least a useful readiness of speech. He entered Queen's College, Cambridge, in 1886, but had only one term; for Mr. Benson's troupe of Shakespeare

players came to Cambridge at that time, and so inflamed him that he got himself taken on probation and went upon the stage. So one term is his sole basis for being counted with the Cambridge poets, Spenser, Milton, Gray, Tennyson, etc. He continued with the troupe six years; but, while the experience must have been of the greatest value to him as a playwright, there is no evidence that he was extraordinarily successful as an actor, though it is mentioned especially that he played the ghost in "Hamlet" so well that he was called before the curtain, a rôle in which Shakespeare himself is said to have done excellently well. Coming once with the troupe to Oxford, he was led by conversation with a cousin and an East Indian student to devote himself again to poetry. The result was "Primavera," a pamphlet of verse, which seems to have no value now in Mr. Phillips's eyes, and is only a find for collectors.

Leaving Mr. Benson's troupe in 1892, he gave himself especially to the study of the Greeks and Milton, determined to restore blank verse to its old dignity and variety. It will sometime be remembered, doubtless, that this new epoch in his life coincides with the death of Tennyson. When his "Eremus" appeared, in 1894, he was congratulated as the first to take advantage of Mr. Bridges's studies in Milton's prosody, but at that time he had not seen Mr. Bridges's work. Mr. Phillips now regards "Eremus" merely as an exercise in versification, and would suppress it if he could. It shows, according to Mr. Gosse, "that the secret of that marvelous lyrical movement of unrhymed iambics, which is Mr. Phillips's particular glory, had not, in 1894, been revealed to him." "The Apparition" is said to be the only verse that Mr. Phillips would preserve from the period before 1895. It was not till 1897, when the volume of poems containing the republished "Christ in Hades" and "Marpessa" appeared, that the advent of a new poet was generally hailed. The recognition was instantaneous and cordial. "He can never provide us again," says Mr. Gosse, "with the thrill which a mature new voice in poetry gives when it is heard for the first time."

Mr. Phillips's first play, "Paolo and Francesca," came out in 1899; the second, "Herod," in 1900. Occasional poems appear now and then in the magazines. The *Academy* regards the "Christ in Hades" as superior even to "Marpessa," as does the appreciative lover of good poetry who introduced me to Stephen Phillips. The Bible text, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [Hades]," suggested the poem, and the *Nekyia* (book xi.) of the "Odyssey," doubtless also the sixth book of the "Æneid," were in the poet's mind, but the details, the treatment, are completely his own. The poem is in unrhymed iambics, and shows that he had completely achieved the task he set himself in 1892, when he devoted himself to the study of Milton—to restore blank verse to its old dignity and variety. He is complete master of this great verse form, and it is unquestionably the fittest in which his especial genius can express itself. If his blank verse shall ever seem greater, it will be because it is more heavily freighted with richer, deeper, broader ideas, the fruit of profounder observation, wider knowledge of men and things. The *form* is now perfect. To be fully appreciated, the poem must be read as a whole, and not once but often. I liked it at first; but not till the third reading did its great power really dawn upon me, and at the fifth reading it seems greater still. There are plenty of characteristic passages which may be quoted with the certainty that their charm will be recognized even when thus detached. Persephone's speech shows his best qualities:

It is the time of tender opening things.
Above my head the fields murmur and wave,
And breezes are just moving the clear heat.
O the midnoon is trembling on the corn,
On cattle calm and trees in perfect sleep.

How touching is the cry of the Athenian spirit to Christ!

O pity us;
For I would ask of thee only to look
Upon the wonderful sunlight, and to smell
Earth in the rain.

All the emptiness of death is in the cry of the woman:

Whom, then, dost thou seek?
For see, we are so changed: thou wouldst not know
The busy form that moved about thy fire.
She has no occupation and no care,
No little tasks.

In the words of the Roman are "the Virgilian stateliness and simplicity:"

Around thee is the scent
Of over-beautiful quick-fading things:
The pang, the gap, the briefness, all the dew,
Tremble, and suddenness of earth: I must
Remember young men dead in their hot bloom,
The sweetness of the world edged like a sword,
The melancholy knocking of those waves,
The deep unhappiness of winds, the light
That comes on things we nevermore shall see.
Yet I am thrilled: thou seemest like the bourne
Of all our music, of the hinting night,
Of souls under the moonlight opening.

In this strong and beautiful poem we recognize the qualities claimed for Mr. Phillips by the *Academy*: "Seriousness of purpose," "interpretative sympathy," "singular instinct for the right word," "a heart attuned to the beauty and the meaning of things," "the perfect fusion of matter into form which is that indefinable, inimitable, undeniable thing style." It is classic in its setting. Not only is the general indebtedness to Homer and Virgil evident, and the atmosphere of classic mythology about it from the parts played in it by Persephone, Hermes, Prometheus, the Athenian ghost, the Roman, the Furies; but individual allusions make us feel that it is a Greek Hades. When the Athenian ghost says,

Is not the laborer,
Returning heavy through the August sheaves
Against the setting sun, who gladly smells
His supper from the opening door—is he
Not happier than these melancholy kings?

we know that the poet had in mind the famous reply of Achilles's shade to Odysseus in the eleventh book of the "Odyssey:" "Rather would I live upon the earth as the hireling of another, with a landless man, than bear sway among

all the dead that be departed.' In the lines, also from the Athenian's address,

Just as a widower, that dreaming holds
His dead wife in his arms, not wondering,
So natural it appears,

the poet certainly was inspired by a glorious passage in Tennyson's "Guinevere"—

Tears of the widower when he sees
A late lost form that sleep reveals;

but he might have had in mind also, as Tennyson undoubtedly had in mind, the similar passage in the great chorus of *Æschylus* ("Agamemnon," 429 ff.). So when the spirit of the woman says,

Thou canst not fetch
Thy drooping, listless woman to the air,

one thinks, as the poet thought, of Orpheus and Eurydice. One is tempted to call especial attention to Ixion, or to the "softly feeding vulture" of Prometheus, or to the reminiscences from the Greek poets evoked by the line,

The beautiful ease of the untroubled gods,

and to other points where one feels Greek influence, if space allowed.

It is a great poem, but "another poem can be even finer than 'Christ in Hades,'" as Mr. Watson said. "A poet's writing should be sweet to the mouth and ear," said Tennyson; and, if not stronger, certainly sweeter, more beautiful is "Marpessa" than "Christ in Hades." Mr. Phillips's two lines of introduction give the gist of the classic legend on which the poem is based: "Marpessa, being given by Zeus her choice between the god Apollo and Idas a mortal, chose Idas." The legend may be found in the "*Iliad*," ix., 557 ff., in Ovid, "*Metamorphoses*," viii., 305, and elsewhere. The scene of the choice is thus brought before us:

When the long day that glideth without cloud,
The summer day, was at her blue deep hour
Of lilies musical with busy bliss,
When very light trembled as with excess,
And heat was frail, and every bush and flower

Was drooping in the glory overcome;
They three together met; on the one side,
Fresh from diffusing light on all the world,
Apollo; on the other, without sleep,
Idas; and in the midst Marpessa stood.
Just as a flower after drenching rain,
So from the falling of felicity
Her human beauty glowed, and it was new;
The bee too near her bosom drowsed and dropped.
But as the god sprang to embrace her, they
Heard thunder, and a little afterward
The far Paternal voice, "Let her decide."

The rest of the dramatic idyl, three hundred and thirty-five lines in all, consists of the addresses of the god and the mortal in preferring their suits, and Marpessa's reply. Some think the speech of Apollo the finest poetry. The god says to the maiden:

Thy life has been
The history of a flower in the air,
Liable but to breezes and to time,
As rich and purposeless as is the rose;
Thy simple doom is to be beautiful.
Thee God created but to grow, not strive,
And not to suffer, merely to be sweet,
The favorite of his rains.

But he warns:

Slowly shalt thou cool to all things great,
And wisely smile at love; and thou shalt see
Beautiful Faith surrendering to Time,
The fierce ingratitude of children loved,
Ah, sting of stings! A mourner shalt thou stand
At Passion's funeral in decent garb.
The greenly silent and cool-growing night
Shall be the time when most thou art awake,
With dreary eyes of all illusion cured,
Beside that stranger that thy husband is.

.
But if thou'lt live with me, then will I kiss
Warm immortality into thy lips;
And I will carry thee above the world,
To share my ecstasy of flinging beams,
And scattering without intermission joy;
And thou shalt know that first leap of the sea
Toward me; the grateful upward look of earth,
Emerging roseate from her bath of dew.

Since she is a woman, Apollo promises her

More tender tasks; to steal upon the sea,
A long-expected bliss to tossing men—
.
To lure into the air a face long sick,
To gild the brow that from its dead looks up,
To shine on the unforgiven of this world.

Idas, in a speech which a noted writer considers the most impassioned poetic address in the language, tells Marpessa he loves her, not for her “body packed with sweet of all this world,”

Nor for that face that might indeed provoke
Invasion of old cities.
.

Thou meanest what the sea has striven to say
So long, and yearned up the cliffs to tell;
Thou art what all the winds have uttered not,
What the still night suggesteth to the heart.
Thy voice is like to music heard ere birth,
Some spirit lute touched on a spirit sea;
Thy face remembered is from other worlds,
It has been died for, though I know not when,
It has been sung of, though I know not where.
It has the strangeness of the luring West,
And of sad sea-horizons.

Marpessa recognizes the bliss of immortality offered her and all the power to do good and soothe pain, but she says:

Yet should I
Linger beside thee in felicity,
Sliding with open eyes through liquid bliss
Forever; still I must grow old. Ah, I
Should ail beside thee, Apollo, and should note,
With eyes that would not be, but yet are dim,
Ever so slight a change from day to day
In thee my husband; watch thee nudge thyself
To little offices that once were sweet:
Slow where thou once wert swift, remembering
To kiss those lips which once thou couldst not leave.
I should expect thee by the Western bay,
Faded, not sure of thee, with desperate smiles,
And pitiful devices of my dress
Or fashion of my hair: thou wouldst grow kind;
Most bitter to a woman that was loved.

But with Idas the mortal, when the first sweet sting of love is past,

There shall succeed a faithful peace;
Beautiful friendship tried by sun and wind,
Durable from the daily dust of life.

.
Then though we must grow old, we shall grow old
Together, and he shall not greatly miss
My bloom faded, and waning light of eyes,
Too deeply gazed in ever to seem dim.

Are not the above, as the *Blackwood's* critic said, "passages that march with the footfalls of the immortals?" Surely they are "stately lines with all the music and the meaning of the highest poetry." In the "Christ in Hades" and "Marpessa" Mr. Phillips has demonstrated afresh the possibilities of classic legends as a source of poetry. It had been supposed that poets like William Morris, Swinburne, and the rest had exhausted that vein, but the genius makes all poetic material his own. For the style of treatment, quite as much as for his subject and his allusions, Mr. Phillips is indebted to the Greeks. "The simplicity of structure is antique," says Mr. Watson, "and the proportion, the symmetry, the poise—these are classic."

I have been asked: "Is Mr. Phillips true to life in making Marpessa talk as she does? Was she not too young, too inexperienced to know some of the things she says to Apollo?" And I answered: "How did Keats know at twenty-five some of the things he said?" Euripides was criticised for putting sentiments into the mouths of some of his women that would better have suited sages. Indeed, it was a philosopher, the poet Euripides, thus expressing himself through the mouth of a woman. But after all, the essential thing, both with Euripides's nurse and with the maiden Marpessa, is whether the sentiment is true to human nature, not whether a maiden or an old nurse might say it. Some complain of "over-voluptuousness" in the verse; that the languorous sweetness cloy the taste. If there be this defect, it is a fault almost sure to be cured, at least ameliorated, as in Tennyson's case, by added years and experience.

The drama "Paolo and Francesca" is the old story of Guinevere and Lancelot, but as delicately handled as in Tennyson's idyl:

To-day I take to wife Ravenna's child.

 Deep in affairs my brother I dispatched

 To bring her on the road to Rimini.

Already we see the trouble begin, just as in the Guinevere story, and we know how it must end. Duke Giovanni, warrior and statesman, already deaf with war, languishes for calm. "I ask," he says,

Henceforth a quiet breathing, that this child,
 Hither all dewy from her convent fetched,
 Shall lead me gently down the slope of life.

But he is already "on the slant of life," and "hath a limp," and "youth goes toward youth." Francesca is very innocent as yet of this great life;

She hath but wondered up at the white clouds.

She asks:

What is it to be sad?
 Nothing hath grieved me but ancient woes,
 Sea perils, or some long ago farewell,
 Or the last sunset cry of wounded kings.
 I have wept but on the pages of a book.

 I am still a child.
 I feel that to my husband I could go,
 Kiss him good night, or sing him to his sleep,
 And there an end.

A week later the cloud of fate has drawn perceptibly nearer. Francesca says to Paolo:

All here are kind to me, all grave and kind,
 But O I have a fluttering up toward joy,
 Lightness and laughter and a need of singing.
 You are more near my age, you understand.

The plot thickens fast. Francesca is too young and innocent to know; Giovanni would keep Paolo about himself and Francesca; but Paolo knows the danger. He tries to fly,

but comes straight back to see Francesca, then will take poison and die. The rest of the story is as Francesca told it to Dante in the "Inferno." Paolo and Francesca were reading Galahaut's story of Lancelot: "Many times that reading made us lift our eyes and took the color from our faces, but only one point was that which overcame us. When we read of the longed-for smile being kissed by such a lover, this one who never from me shall be divided kissed my mouth all trembling." It is all told more fully, but not so beautifully, in "Boccaccio." At last it was as old Angela, the half-seer nurse, foretold:

I see two lying dead upon a bier—
Slain suddenly, and in each other's arms.

Is it a great drama? I do not know; I am only sure that it is a beautiful poem. "Poetry beautiful as any that has been given us since Tennyson was in his prime," says Prof. Trent. The striking characteristics shown in "Marpessa" are all here—almost perfect diction, melodious verse, lyric sweetness, single lines and passages that thrill and linger with us. It too is "sweet to the mouth and ear." But has Mr. Phillips the requisite intellectual power and moral greatness? It is perhaps premature to say, and the bewildering sweetness of the verse makes it hard to be an unbiased judge. There is a Greek felicity of phrase and a general air of restraint, especially in the limited number of characters. Only Paolo and Francesca, Giovanni and his Cousin Lucrezia, are important, the last being perhaps the distinctest dramatic creation of the poet. But while the drama is restrained, it is not austere like the best Greek dramas. It has borrowed from the Greek drama what might be best appropriated by modern poetry; but it is not Greek like Sophocles; it is rather Greek as Keats was Greek—restrained like the Greek, but with a sweetness that is rather romantic than classic.

The play "Herod" is based on authentic history, which may be read in Josephus. The two chief characters, and the only ones of prime importance, are Herod, king of Judea, and Mariamne, his queen, of the old Maccabean line. Herod is a masterful man, and bears a love nigh madness for Mari-

amne. These are qualities that fit him for tragedy. Mariamne's young brother, Aristobulus, because of his Maccabean lineage the popular idol, and so a menace to the throne, is drowned by Herod's order; but in slaying her brother, Herod killed Mariamne's love, and finally, goaded to desperation by suspicion, he condemned her, thus fulfilling an oracle: "He shall kill that thing which most he loves." Then after a spell of madness passed by the Dead Sea's shore he returns to the palace under the delusion that Mariamne is still alive. At sight of Mariamne's embalmed body, which has been brought before him, he stands in cataleptic trance.

As a drama "Herod" is stronger than "Paolo and Francesca," but here, as there, "the merit of the play lies in the love passages and in the truly poetic feeling and diction which form the most important part of Mr. Phillips's equipment." It too is Greek in the limited number of characters, for there are really only two that profoundly interest us, Herod and Mariamne; though the latter's brother, Aristobulus, and Sohemus, Herod's faithful retainer, contribute greatly to the effectiveness of the plot and to the clearness with which the protagonist and deuteragonist stand out. But the love passion of the play is modern, not Greek. The two greatest scenes in the play are doubtless in Act Two, when Herod returns from winning over Octavius Cæsar and is taxed by Mariamne with the murder of her brother, and again when Mariamne says finally: "Herod, I cannot change; my love is dead." For stage purposes more effective still may be the final scene where Herod, only half recovered from his madness, sends for Mariamne, whom he believes alive. Purely as literature the most beautiful single passage in the play has always seemed to me that where Herod, to his mother's and sister's urging to condemn Mariamne, replies:

Would you commit such beauty to the earth?
Those eyes that bring upon us endless thoughts!
That face that seems as it had come to pass
Like a thing prophesied! To kill her!
And I, if she were dead, I too would die,
Or linger in the sunlight without life.

O, terrible to live but in remembering,
To call her name down the long corridors;
To come on jewels that she wore laid by;
Or open suddenly some chest, and see
Some favorite robe she wore on such a day!
I dare not bring upon myself such woe.

So far as my knowledge goes, the critic is right who lately said, "It is the best work of its kind since the death of Browning;" and as Mr. Brownell thinks, there is "unlikely to be an English dramatic poem of equal interest published until the author of 'Herod' writes another."

In Mr. Phillips's poetical work two defects are most apparent. The first is a lack of lyric power. His lyrics do not sing. It is blank verse where he is strongest, and there is to be found "the lyric sweetness of his unrhymed iambs," of which Mr. Gosse speaks. His lyric power is by no means that of Tennyson or Browning, Keats or Shelley, and doubtless he will never sing in such pure lyric strains as any of these. The second defect is lack of humor. Even Shakespeare wrote only one play without humor, and Mr. Phillips has written two. Unless he can remedy this defect, he will hardly as a dramatist be ranked with the greatest. But in the sphere of the dramatic idyl his defective humor is not necessarily a fatal lack. Wordsworth had no humor; his best poetry is characterized by high seriousness unrelieved by humor, and yet Wordsworth is third in the royal line of British poets. At any rate, here is real poetic achievement. Predictions are rash, especially about the fate of poets, yet I venture the prediction that in ten years Mr. Phillips will be ranked—supposing Mr. Swinburne then no longer among the living—as the greatest living British poet.

CHARLES FORSTER SMITH.